



BLEZDINGELE — The Dance of the Swallows was danced by the members of the Ciurlionis Group while they were still in Germany. In the foreground is Mrs. Bronė Jameikis, an accomplished dancer and weaver, now residing in Chicago.

The girl then flung the axe upward and whoever caught it was entitled to kiss the girl. A rather dangerous way to earn a kiss.

But alas! None of the dances of that era remain. Lithuania's conversion (in 1413) took place during a period when Christian fanaticism and intolerance was at its height, the age of the Crusades and inquisition when anything that was not Christian was anathema. Thus, along with the Temples to Perkunas and Pantheon went also the dance.

The earliest Christian era dances were reduced to the circle (ratelis) "play party game" variety, suitable for children who had to play. There were numerous circle dances done to the accompaniment of songs whose texts dealt with every creature under Lithuanian skies: flowers bushes, fish, trees and farm life. It is from these circle (and some contra) games that the more elaborate dances developed. Many, to this day, bear the unmistakable relationship and paternity of a simple play party game of yore.

The older Lithuanian dances, after their emergence from the simple play form, were sedately slow and restrained. With the passing of years they became livelier. However, they were still free of polka steps. The polka came to Lithuania from Poland, years before it was introduced to Paris by a Czech maiden, from whence it spread to the rest of the western world. The waltz never became a part of the Lithuanian folk dance.

Lithuania lost her independence during the three partitions which took place between 1772-75. A. Kesaraukas, Rev. M. Valancius and others, speak of some present day favorite folk dances (Kepurinė, Lenciūgėlis, Oželis, etc.) as late as 1863. Age M. Benedictsen, Danish author who visited Lithuania during the second half of the XIX century, wrote in his "Lithuania—The Awakening Of A Nation" (Copenhagen, 1895): ".....A dance which the young peasants of today (1895-VFB) still practice in many places. It is called 'Blezdingėlė' — The Dance Of The Swallows; I have seen this dance one summer evening in a little birch grove. Couple behind couple take up their position in two sets facing each other, then the swing around, bend down and pass through, quick as a flash so that really in a way reminds one of the swallows twisting and rapid flight."



A dancing scene in Lithuania taken during the 1930's.

No doubt, dancing continued, although it was not mentioned. With the intensified Russification of the Lithuanians during the Tsarist regimes, a decline in the adult folk dance set in. The people suffered great hardships and persecutions. Lithuanian education and the printed word were prohibited, and under pain of execution or exile to Siberia. There was nothing to dance about, but they could still sing the plaintive airs of the daina which lent themselves to this mood. New songs appeared. Some were sad, others carried messages of hope or spoke of the glory of ancient Lietuva. The father of this period — a "renaissance of hope" — was the poet, Msgr. Jonas Maironis (1862-1932).

Toward the end of the nineteenth century and until about 1925 a new type of dance crept in from Russia and Poland, mainly from the former. It was the figure-ball-room dance. First, it appeared at the balls of the Russian ruling circles and among the Polish "Pantswa" (landed gentry) of Lithuania, then to the Jewish population of the Lithuanian cities and finally to the Lithuanians themselves. In this category belong the Padespan, Kokietka, Krakoviakas, Vengierka and others, but the Polka, as a simple social dance, remained the dance of fashion. New folk dances and even some of the older ones incorporated the polka step.

After Lithuania gained her independence in 1918 and until 1935, the folk dance lay dormant, neglected and practically unloved. In the cities, even the polka was looked down upon with disfavor and its place was occupied with foxtrots, tangos and round waltzing. But in that year, London folk dancers invited Lithuania to participate in the International Folk Festival held there. The Lithuanians, who began looking on folk dancing as a lowly and unwanted art, were caught with their hands down. However, the desire to participate in the festival was great. With help from the government, scouts (headed by Miss Avietinas, who is now in Detroit, Michigan) were sent to every nook of the land to dig up the folk dances. The task was not an easy one.

The greatest wealth of song, dance and legend was found in the Dzūkija, southeastern Lithuania, affectionately called "Dainava" — the Land of Song. In the city of Alytai at a special open air folk festival, the people who remembered folk dances were asked to come and demonstrate them. All dancers were oldsters who were probably dancing youths during the age of Bishop M. Valancius (1801-1875). At the time of their demonstrating, they were in their seventies or older. But a Dzūkas is never too old to dance. It was there that Sukcius, Kepurinė, Mikita and others were "discovered." The researchers traveled to accessible and inaccessible places and came back with Kubilas (from Kupiškis), Lenciūgėlis and others. There was little time to rehearse and prepare the dances for the London demonstration. They worked hard and practiced on the boat which took them to England. The Lithuanians captured highest recognition and returned with a new appreciation and enthusiasm after noting the high regard all nations held for the folk dance. This had given them a new impetus for the revival and appreciation of the dance. The government created a subsidy. Miss Marija Baronas (now in Australia), who headed this activity in the Kuno Kultūros (physical education) Department, was sent to indoctrinate the Lithuanian folk dance throughout the country and to the Lithuanian settlers of the United States.

After the occupation of Lithuania by the Soviets in 1940, Germany in 1941, and Russia again in 1944, Lithuanians in the thousands fled their land, but carried with them the song and dance. They organized or reorganized song and dance ensembles, the most noted one which received wide attention is the "Ciurlionis" group of dancers, singers and traditional instrumentalists. They are now in Cleveland, Ohio, and are still upholding their excellent reputation in the United States, the banner was carried by the pioneering group, the Lithuanian Youth Society, which was organized by the author, (LYS, 1932-42) and (ATEITIS, 1939——). Many other groups came into being, particularly after the great influx of Lithuanian refugees. Lithuanian choirs, church or lay, were very plentiful and existed since the end of the last century.

In occupied Lithuania, fortunately, the Lithuanian dance was permitted to flourish under the capable direction of Juozas Lingys. Festivals, regional and national, were held and the Lithuanian dancers won first honors in the All Soviet festivals held in Moscow. The refugees brought the dance with them to nearly every nook in the world; Australia, New Zealand, Africa, nearly every South American country, Canada, England and many other European countries. In the United States, the Lithuanian dance is not only very much alive among the Lithuanians, but it has found great favor among the American folk dancers throughout this entire great land.

Note: All dances mentioned in this article appear in the "Dance of Lietuva" by Vyts Beliajus, \$5.00. It contains 54 dances.

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BOOKS

HISTORY OF SQUARE DANCING, by S. FOSTER DAMON. American Antiquarian Society. Worcester, Mass. (no price quoted)

One of the best histories on the American Square Dance. Published unpretentiously, 98 pages of excellent information accompanied by informative foot - notes. Though Mr. Damon tries to be an apologist for the Puritans, trying heroically to prove the contrary with a few exceptions, viz: that Puritans did not consider dancing the works of the devil, the book is, nonetheless, one of the best to date on this subject.

DANCES OF POLAND, by STEFAN J. ZIELINSKI. Sajewski Publishing Co., Chicago. 48 pages \$7.50

Many folk dancers awaited eagerly for the release of this book published by Sajewski, a well known Polish music center of Chicago. Until recently only Dance and Be Merry, Vol. 2, carried the more typical Polish dances. But this new long awaited book will be a terrible disappointment. It is poorly and inadequately described; the pages are not numbered; the dances, for the most part, are not only compositions but also set to composed music and yet it masquerades under the banner of folk dances. It contains only nine dances and it is paper bound, and yet the price is a steep \$7.50, even though the dances are described in Polish and English.

The collection contains; Krrakowiak (folk), Bialy Mazur (the same routine to be used to folk tune and to the composition by Moniuszko from the Opera "Halka"), Polonaise (these are always compositions as they are the grand marches of halls of the nobles), Zbojnicki (several folk tunes are given), a "Ballet" Kujawiak to Weinawski's composition and another, "Society" Kujawiak to K. Lada's. An Oberek, a Wiengierka and a composition for the "Monopol" Polka, are the other dances.

The Littlest Wiseman: Dr. and Mrs. Lloyd Shaw. Caxton Printers. \$3.00

To the folk dance world of the United States, the Cheyenne Mountain School of Colorado Springs, Colo., might be remembered as the place where Dr. Lloyd Shaw was a principal and where he popularized the American, Western style, square dance. But during Dr. Shaw's principalship one more tradition was introduced back in 1917, an annual pageant of the Nativity. When this pageant, "The Littlest Wiseman," was once seen, it was annually looked forward to as an important event. Recently Dr. Shaw made this pageant available to all who may wish to present this charming play by publishing it. The pageant is an original of Dr. Shaw, while the poems used in the play are inspiring creations of Mrs. Shaw. The play is sweet, charming and inspirational.

The book, besides an interesting history of the play, also contains a two-part section of a Carol Service containing a detailed description of how to present it effectively and a selection of traditional choir carols, some of which go back to the fifteenth century.

For copies write to Dr. Shaw, Box 203, Colorado Springs, Colorado.